

THE NEED FOR LEARNERS TO UNDERSTAND THEIR READINESS FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT. Open and distance learning programmes are often faced with high attrition rates amongst learners. Studies suggest that a number of causative factors contribute to students dropping out from courses, even as early as the second semester. Factors that have been identified generally fall under personal, family and institutional categories. While open and distance learning education providers appear to try and address this problem using numerous strategies, one particular aspect that seems to have been generally neglected but ought to be given due attention is helping students understand their readiness for open and distance learning. This paper seeks to describe a pilot project whereby open and distance learners are provided with an online self-assessment tool which measures aspects deemed important to open and distance learning, that is, their (1) personal attributes such as time management, procrastination, academic attributes, persistence, locus of control and willingness to ask for help, (2) preferred learning styles based on the multiple intelligences model, (3) basic instructional technology knowledge and skills, and (4) typing speed and accuracy. The tool also provides a complete report detailing their strengths and opportunities for improvement as well as resources to succeed. It is envisaged that the provision and use of such a tool would help learners better prepare themselves to open and distance learning environments and thereby help ensure they have a successful learning experience.

The Problem of Learner Attrition in Open and Distance Learning

Learner attrition is always a cause for concern among higher education providers. This is particularly the case in open and distance learning institutions where according to Urtel (2008), drop-out rates greatly exceed those of traditional institutions of higher learning. The problem is even more acute for fully online courses (Carr, 2000). Meanwhile, although there have been claims that the blended learning approach, which combines the face-to-face mode of learning and online learning, adopted by open and distance learning institutions is able to increase retention rates (University of Central Florida as cited in Dickson, 2007; Melton, Graf & Chopak-Foss, 2009), learner retention remains a priority.

Attrition rates for open distance learning institutions vary between institutions and from year-to-year. Attrition rates for open and distance learning institutions in Australia, Malaysia, Thailand and Africa have been reported to be around 50 percent (Deden 2005; Perreton & Lentell, 2009; Latif, Sungstri & Bahroom, 2009). Meanwhile, completion rates of between 22.5 and 34 percent have been reported for India, 14.5 to 34 percent for Korea National Open University and 0.7 percent for the Open University of Indonesia (Hulsmann as cited in Abdullah, 2004). The problem of learner drop-out becomes even more worrisome when learners withdraw even before submitting their first assignment. At least 35 percent was reported in the UK Open University (Simpson as cited in Tyler-Smith, 2005) and 67 to 84 percent in the Indira Gandhi Open University of India (Biswas & Mythili, 2006).

Factors Contributing to Learner Drop-out

According to Tyler-Smith (2005) and Henke and Russum (2001), there have not been any consistent conclusions regarding the extent of the problem, nor a clear understanding of the causative factors. In attempting to understand and help arrest the problem of attrition, researchers have examined various factors that might contribute to learners withdrawing from a programme. Gibson (cited in Deden, 2005) identified three categories of factors: (1) student factors (including educational preparation, motivational and persistence attributes and student academic self-concept), (2) situational factors (namely family and employer support as well as changes in life circumstances), and (3) educational system factors (such as quality of instructional materials and tutorials). This classification

is rather similar to the factors identified by Cross and Wang et al. (cited in Olubiyi & Inegbedion, 2008), that is, (1) situational (poor learning environment, lack of time due to work or home responsibilities and geographical location of learning centre to students' residence/office), (2) institutional (cost of programmes, institutional procedures, course scheduling/availability, quality of tutorial assistance and quality of learners' support service) and (3) dispositional (lack of clear goal, stress and time management, problems associated with learning style and adult pride).

Causative factors that contribute to a learner's decision to drop out is probably more complex and inter-related than what are often singled out by researchers or that expressed by the drop-outs themselves. Tyler-Smith (2005) stressed that a learner could drop out possibility due to the inability on the part of the learner to overcome increased levels of anxiety as he/she engages with unfamiliar modes of learning. Further, Simpson as cited in Tyler-Smith (2005) suggested that how a learner perceives his/her initial experience and his/her ability to cope could have a significant impact on a decision to drop out. The learner who is unable to get around to learning efficiently and effectively is at risk of being the next datum for attrition statistics; sooner or later when his/her reaches the threshold level he/she can cope, it is a certainty that he/she will drop out.

Retention Efforts

In attempting to reduce attrition rates, higher education providers have approached the problem from the institutional perspective and the learner's perspective. From the institutional perspective, efforts include improving curriculum design and content, enhancing online learner management systems, improving institution-learner communication and learner tracking, improving tutoring skills as well as making available flexible class scheduling and online technical support. Efforts that focus on the learners include developing learner support services such as counseling and organizing face-to-face orientation or induction programmes (which include introduction to the learning management system used as well as study and time management skills) and examination clinics.

An interesting note made by King as cited in Dzakiria (2004) is that "...while we put considerable effort into student support systems, often our administrative arrangements were overwhelmingly a response to institutional requirements rather than student needs and frequently disempowered those who relied on our support" (para: Help learners develop strategies for learning). Dzakiria (2004) pointed out that distance learning institutions have the responsibility of "helping them to become responsible learners; know their own strengths and weaknesses; have confidence in their own ability ..." (para: Help learners develop strategies for learning). In line with this, Bernard, Brauer, Abrami and Sturkes (2004) consider "readiness for online learning" as being critical in determining a learner's persistence at successfully completing his/her studies. Further, findings from a research to determine the relationship between the level of self-directed learning readiness and academic achievement among distance learners in a Malaysian university suggest that there exists a significant, strong, positive relationship between level of readiness and academic achievement (Haron, 2003).

The questions that follow then are: (1) how do open and distance institutions help learners identify their own strengths and weaknesses Leigh as well as their readiness for distance and online learning? (2) what may be done once the learners have assessed their own readiness?

The Use of Online Self-Assessment Tools

Watkins, and Triner (2004) suggested that self-assessment is one way of gauging a potential online learner's readiness. Online self-assessment tools have been introduced by universities in the United States of America (USA) such as the Fort Valley State University in Georgia, the School of Nursing at the Indiana University, the University of Georgia and the Washington State University, as well as community Colleges such as Mesa Community College in San Diego, Pierce College in California, Linn Benton Community College near Albany and Portland Community College in Oregon. They vary from 10 item quizzes or questionnaires to 19 item ones that help learners determine their level of readiness for online and distance learning.

These online self-assessment tools have been positioned differently; from tools that help learners assess if distance learning is a fit for future learners and to guide learners with their decision to enrol in an online course to tools that help learners become successful learners. Generally feedback is provided at the end of the assessment, along with strategies for improvement. Components that are assessed include online and technology experience and skills, as well as learner's learning environment, goal and purposes, learning preference, study habits and life skills.

Dzakiria (2004) firmly believed that distance learners need to recognise their strengths and limitations. He said that once that is done, counsellors can help distance learners to explore their strengths/limitations and their learning goals/objectives by assuming a facilitative role in the learning process. Likewise, Martinez (2003) believes that if retention strategies which aim at changing the way in which learners perceive or respond to certain experiences can be developed, attrition rates may be lowered. He emphasized that a crucial step, among others, is to tap into the learners' self-motivation and self-direction and to "get the right message and the right tools to each learner at the right time" (p. 2). Besides that, in a study on adult persistence in learning programmes, Comings, Parrella, and Soricone (2000) found that strategies such as helping learners manage positive and negative forces, enhance self-efficacy, set goals and measure progress play a significant role in retention efforts.

METHODOLOGY

The Online Self-Assessment Tool

The online self-assessment tool used was the Readiness for Education at a Distance Indicator (READI). READI was created by a group of distance learning administrators in the United States of America who believed that a potential road block to student success in distance learning was lack of student readiness for such learning and saw the need to develop a comprehensive online self-assessment tool that help address the challenge of improving learner readiness for online, distance learning.

READI is a self diagnostic tool that helps learners measure five components that are considered important to successful online distance learning environments: (1) Personal attributes such as time management, procrastination, persistence, academic attributes, locus of control, and willingness to ask for help, (2) Preferred learning styles based on the multiple intelligences model (visual, verbal, social, solitary, physical, logical, and aural), (3) Basic instructional technology knowledge (usage, vocabulary) and skills/competency, (4) Typing speed and accuracy and (5) Reading rate and recall (this was not used in OUM's study as it was felt that students' lack of proficiency in the English language used would affect their performance in this component as for some courses, English is not the medium of instruction and neither is it the learners' first language). Learners who are unable to complete all of the components log out and return later to start from where they left off, by confirming the email they want the PIN to be sent.

Once learners finish answering the questions, they obtain the results immediately online, together with links to resources for support and remediation. Results of the self-assessment for Personal Attributes and Technical Knowledge and Skills are reported to students on a scale of 1 through 4 with 1 considered a weakness, 2 and 3 opportunities for improvement and 4 for strength. READI scores are presented through bar charts (for Personal Attribute and Technical Knowledge and Skills), graphics resembling speedometers and dart boards (typing speed and accuracy) and radars (for learning styles). Explanatory text is provided for each item scored in READI. The report concludes with over thirty links to additional resources for remediation and support. The institution's administrators are also given access to learners' individual reports as well as a summary of learners' readiness classified as Fail, Questionable or Pass.

According to Distance Education Consulting And Development Experts consulting (DECADE Consulting, 2009), the company that owns READI, studies by external research agencies indicated that READI has strong construct validity in that it is an indicator of the goodness of fit for distance learning as is evidenced by multiple correlations that are statistically significant at the .01 level. Further, of the five constructs measured by READI, the construct with the most correlation to

academic success and goodness of fit was Personal Attributes. The variable of the participant's individual attributes scores were statistically significant at the .001 level with all measures of academic success and goodness of fit. The Cronbach alpha coefficient of the various components are: (a) .85 for Technical usage, (b) .82 for Learning style, (c) .76 for Personal attributes, (d) .64 for Technical vocabulary and (e) .44 for Technical competency

Limitations and Assumptions of the Study

The categorisation of learner readiness is according to the level set by default for higher institutions of learning. Since the tool was developed for American learners, the levels set might or might not apply to Malaysian learners. While there was an option of adjusting the readiness range for the various components, OUM READI administrators did not do so for lack of data on what might apply to Malaysian higher education learners. Further, it is assumed that the learners who did the self-assessment were serious about it, answering questions to the best of their ability. Besides that, in no way may the results discussed in this paper be used to generalize to Malaysian learners or even OUM learners; they merely represent a very small section of OUM learners in the May semester 2009 who had assessed their readiness online.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to examine the level of readiness among OUM learners in terms of:

- (1) Personal attributes
- (2) Technical Competency
- (3) Technical Knowledge

Demographic Data of READI Takers

READI was made available to OUM learners between mid-May and mid-July 2009. During this period of two months, a total of 265 OUM learners accessed the site. This paper reports only results obtained for 139 learners who completed all categories (Personal Attributes, Technical Competency and Technical Knowledge). The majority of the learners in this study (52 out of 139 learners or 31.4 percent) were the first semester diploma and bachelor learners. This could be due to their interest in knowing how well they might fit with the new mode of learning as well as the relevance of this tool to the Learning Skills for Open and Distance course which includes topics such as learning styles, time management, goal setting and online learning.

Analyses of Learner Readiness

As may be seen from Figure 1, the level of readiness in terms of Personal Attribute for the majority of the learners from the Diploma and Bachelor's levels were found to be questionable or more nicely said, presented opportunities for improvement. Of the three Master's level learners who took READI, one passed, another failed and the third's level was questionable. The sole taker from the PhD category passed in terms of Personal Attributes. Overall, it could be said that learners in this study needed to be helped in improving time management and persistence. They should also be advised on how not to procrastinate in their studies and well as be willing to ask for help and take control of their studies. Such proactive actions should help ensure they experience successful learning.

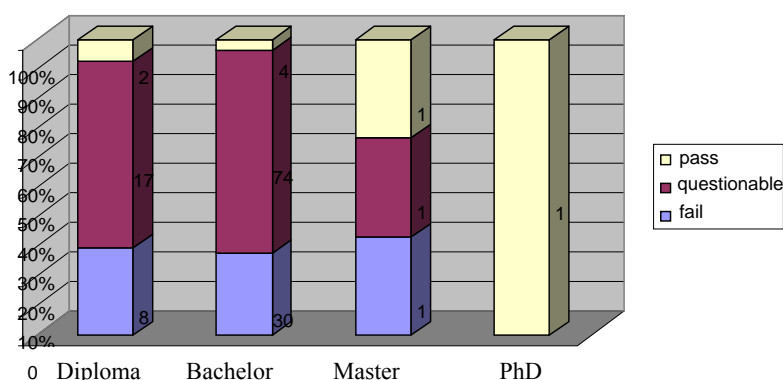


Figure 1. Analysis of Learner Readiness in Terms of Personal Attributes

Technical Competency seems to be the forte of this group of READI takers. The majority of them appear to have passed in terms of level of readiness (Figure 2) for matters such as e-mailing, following links on a web page, opening, saving and printing files, using search engines and identifying appropriate software application for specific tasks. This augurs well for the institution as the learners should not experience much problem benefitting from online interaction via the learning management system. Still, remediation action ought to be taken to assist those who fail in this component so that they do not lag behind their peers in terms of online social and academic interaction with peers and their tutor.

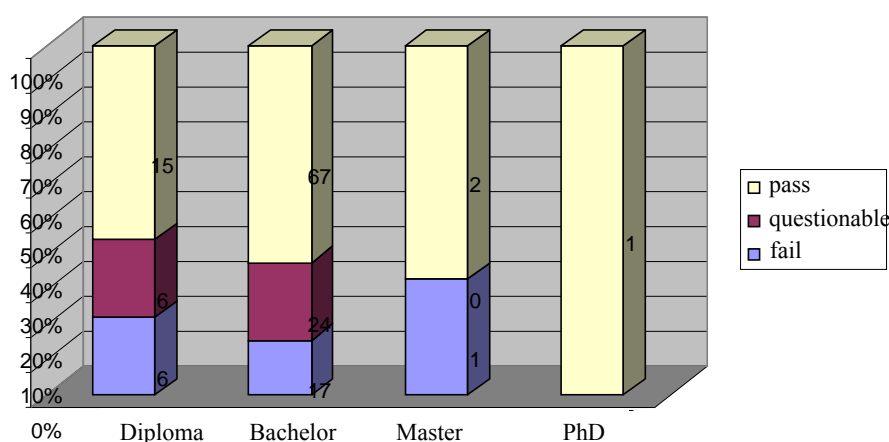


Figure 2. Analysis of Learner Readiness in Terms of Technical Competency

As for the level of readiness in terms of Technical Knowledge, the majority of the learners did not pass the level set (Figure 3) and could be helped to improve in this area. As this section deals with the degree to which learners integrate technology in other areas of their life besides studies and knowledge of Internet connection used by learners, perhaps what could be done is to help them be aware of the different types of Internet connection available in the market so that they are able to make better decisions when choosing the type of connection at home.

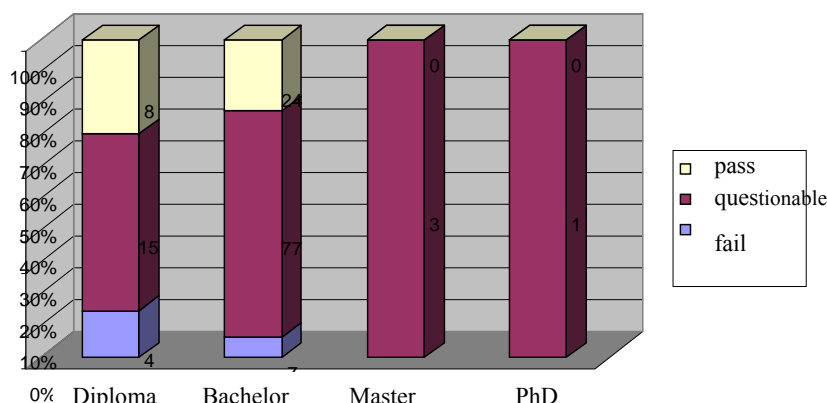


Figure 3. Analysis of Learner Readiness in Terms of Technical Knowledge

Feedback on READI

Feedback was also obtained from learners who had accessed and used READI on (1) the usefulness of READI in identifying learners' strengths and weaknesses and (2) the level of difficulty of the English language used in READI. An online survey that was linked from OUM's learning management system and the READI results page was utilised.

The total number of respondents was 56. Out of this number, 60 percent said that READI was very useful in helping them to identify their strengths and weaknesses, 27 percent said it was useful and only 13 percent said that it was slightly useful. Comments by learners include:

- 1) The results are true about my Learning Style.
- 2) *Bagus untuk menilai kemahiran dan kelebihan kita* (Good for assessing our skills and strengths).
- 3) *Sangat baik untuk menguji pelajar mengetahui tahap cara pembelajaran dan tahap kemahiran menggunakan komputer dan memahami bahasa IT* (Very good for learners to know their learning style and level of computer competency as well as IT vocabulary)
- 4) Its really good for student to identifying the characteristic by own (sic).
Ianya sangat berguna dan membantu saya di dalam mengenal diri saya. (It is very useful and helps me know myself better.)

As to the difficulty of the English language that was used in READI, there was mixed response that could be attributed to the learners' own level of proficiency in the language. The majority (36%) said that the language used was slightly difficult. The rest of the responses are as follows: 28 percent slightly easy, 15 percent easy and 13 percent very easy. Only 8 percent said it was either difficult or very difficult.

CONCLUSION

Much as we wish so, no institution in the world gets perfect learners; the reality is that we get all kinds of learners who at least at the time of registration harbour hopes of completing their studies and obtaining the relevant qualifications. While institutions spare no efforts in ensuring their learners progress through their studies successfully within the allocated time frame, much still needs to be done in helping them keep on the right track. Waiting for a learner to miss class, fail to submit an assignment or fail a test first and only then take action may be a little too late. Open and distance learning institutions need to tackle the situation right at the beginning, before it becomes a problem.

To the question of how open and distance institutions can help learners identify their own strengths and weaknesses as well as their readiness for distance and online learning, a possible answer is the use of online self-assessment tools. The use of self-assessment tools like READI is a crucial first step toward retaining learners till they complete their studies. It would do good to make it compulsory for learners to do self-assessment rather than optional. This is because they may not see the need to do so as may be seen from the small number who accessed and completed the online self-assessment in this study although it was widely promoted to the learners. Also, it would be timely to have the self-assessments at the beginning of the learners' studies so that they experience successful learning right from the start.

As for what may be done once the learners have assessed their own readiness, institutions need to initiate measures that help them improve through remediation or support services. Just-in-time hands-on, minds-on workshops such as those specifically focusing on setting goals, managing time, or improving technological knowledge and competency could be organized particularly for learners whose readiness scores fall in the fail range. Further, the academic unit and tutors concerned need be vigilant in conducting periodical monitoring of attendance and follow-up of learners categorised as at-risk from such self-assessments. For certain, addressing learners' weaknesses and challenges is as complex as the contributing factors. The different units involved such as those in-charge of academic affairs, tutors, assessment, learner service, retention and counseling, need to liaise closely with one other. A co-ordinated effort would go a long way in helping retain learners.

When we persuade learners to identify their own strengths and weaknesses and then provide opportunities for improvement, we empower learners to take responsibility for their own academic success. There could be nothing more powerful and meaningful than that.

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